

The Amelia Earhart Legacy at Purdue University

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Jessica Perkins

PURDUE
UNIVERSITY

What impact did Amelia Earhart have on Purdue University during and after her employment?

Purdue Advisor

Amelia Earhart joined Purdue from 1935-1937 as part of the Department of Aeronautics and as a “Consultant in Careers for Women,” where she formed a close professional relationship with former-president Edward C. Elliot as well as with many female students, with whom she lived and dined with in Windsor Residence Hall. One of her reasons for joining Purdue as Elliot stated was because of her primary interest to **“find and make some addition to the solution of the problem of careers for women.”**

Flying Laboratory

To aid with Amelia’s aviation goals alongside her other work at Purdue, members of the Purdue Research Foundation Board spent \$40,000 to purchase the Lockheed Electra which was called the “Flying Laboratory” because of the new technological advancements that had been made in the field of aviation. These modern instruments included mechanisms that de-iced plane wings, radio-telephone systems, and newer navigational equipment. The Purdue airport was one of the locations where Amelia trained for her last flight, and the creation of the Amelia Earhart-Putnam Research Fund for Aeronautics allowed her to prepare and collect data on her last flight. Other areas of aviation that Amelia wanted to research was the “human reactions of flying,” and if pilots face psychological changes due to the nature of aviation.



Earhart with students atop her Lockheed Electra, 1936.



Earhart with former Purdue President Edward C. Elliot, 1936.

Work with Female College Students

During her time at Purdue, Amelia worked to improve the support of women in college, and made sure female students would be understood by their professors and the university as a whole. One way this was done was through a “questionnaire for women students.” This survey actually encouraged women to have careers after school and questioned them about challenging gender roles. One question includes, **“If you were the wage earner and your husband ran the house, would you consider his work financially equivalent to yours?”** Amelia also challenged Purdue’s required courses for students after hearing women’s complaints about not being allowed more elective courses, and proposed the integration of science and arts classes. From her surveys Amelia found that in 1934-35, **92% of women wished to have a career after graduation**. To combat misogyny on campus, Amelia suggested less rigidity between the different colleges at Purdue and more integration of classes that could be taken by both men and women, which she proposed would **“serve to eliminate some of the condescending attitude on the part of the men students toward the girls.”** Aside from advising female students, Amelia lived in a women’s dormitory and was known to eat with female students often; her active work towards improving the situation of female students greatly impacted campus life at Purdue, even inspiring Edward Elliott to be more aware of women’s problems.

Legacy at Purdue

After her disappearance, the 1938 Purdue yearbook honored her and her significant impact on aviation and the progression of women in careers, **“To our gallant lady, whose sole purpose in life centered about furthering womanhood’s accomplishments.”** Edward Elliot continued conferences to encourage women’s work and opportunities at Purdue, and the number of women enrolled at Purdue University began to increase. In 1964, Earhart Hall was built, honoring Earhart with a statue of the famous airwoman that stands outside of the residence hall, erected in 2009. Today there are many resources available for women in previously male-dominated fields, such as the Women in Aviation Chapter, the Women in Engineering program, and Girls Aviation day at the Purdue airport, which encourages girls in grades 3-8 to pursue dreams of aviation. Because of her ambition and focus on the progression of women, Amelia Earhart played a large role in Purdue University’s accommodations towards the demands of female students, and the increase overall of women obtaining accomplished careers and moving past gender stereotypes that have been set for centuries.

Acknowledgements and References

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